

## **STUDENT TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF TEACHING PRACTICE AT OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTION IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This small-scale study focused on the experiences of student teachers towards teaching practice in an open and distance learning (ODL) institution in South Africa. The sample consisted of 65 fourth year students enrolled for Bachelor of Education, specializing in secondary school teaching. The mixed-method research design consisting of quantitative and qualitative approaches was used. Questionnaire and individual interview discussions were used as instruments for data collection. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze quantitative data. Content analysis was used to analyze qualitative data. The study revealed that student teachers experienced challenges with regard to on-time placement in schools, supervision and mentoring. Based on the findings, recommendations were made. Among others was that mentors and university contracted supervisors should be constantly empowered through workshops to work effectively in leading and guiding student teachers. On the issues of placement of students in approved schools, the university should consider implementing a system which will enable students to place themselves online. Placing students in approved schools is a major challenge for the ODL institution in South Africa given the great number of students that have to be placed in schools every year and the slow pace at which the institution is moving to integrate technology in addressing the problem.

**Keywords:** Teaching practice, open and distance learning, student teachers, experiences, South Africa.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Higher education institutions offering teacher education programs in South Africa are required in terms of education policies to ensure that their students are placed in schools where they can interact with the realities of the classroom teaching and the broader school environment (Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa, 2011 – 2015; Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications, 2011; Department of Basic Education and Training, 2011; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2011). This activity where student teachers are placed in schools in order to gain teaching experience is referred to as teaching practice (Department of Basic Education and Training, 2011; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2011). A number of concepts such as "practice teaching", "field studies", "infield experiences", "school-based experience" and "internship" are used in describing this activity (Taneja, 2000:35). However, the open and distance learning (ODL) institution under study prefers to use the term "teaching practice" over others since it embraces all the learning experiences of student teachers in schools.

Teaching practice has three major connotations, namely the practice of teaching skills and acquisition of the role of a teacher, the whole range of experiences that a student teacher goes through in schools and the practical aspects of the course as distinct from

theoretical studies (Nwankezi, Okoli & Mezieobi, 2011). Therefore, teaching practice offers student teachers the opportunity to learn and develop as professional teachers along the dimensions of pedagogic knowledge, subject matter knowledge, pastoral knowledge, ecological knowledge, inquiry knowledge and personal knowledge (Mtetwa & Dyanda, 2003). Tillema, Smith and Leshem (2010) are of the view that during the teaching, student teachers experience a learning situation that is unique and different from campus-based learning as they are called upon to respond to new circumstances. In the same vein, Komba and Kira (2013) note that during teaching practice, student teachers observe subject teachers at work so as to learn about teachers' skills, strategies and classroom achievements. It is also the time when they evaluate their own teaching experiences through interactions with teachers and lecturers and, through self-reflection, implement a variety of approaches, strategies and skills with a view to bringing about meaningful learning (Komba & Kira, 2013). Thus, the underlying aim of teaching practice is to introduce students to, and prepare them for, the teaching profession (Ntsaluba & Chireshe, 2013). As a result, a student teacher may not graduate in South African Higher Education Institutions without having undergone the experience of teaching practice.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

**Teaching Practice as Part of Teacher Training Programs at ODL Institution in South Africa**  
The two most popular teacher training programs offered in South African Higher Education Institutions are the Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) (a teaching qualification obtained after a first degree) and the Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree (an integrated four-year course in initial teacher education). However, the BEd degree program at the ODL institution under study consists of three phases, namely the Foundation Phase, the Intermediate and Senior Phase, and the Senior and Further Education and Training Phase. This kind of structure encompasses all phases of schooling in South Africa. The South African school education system incorporates four phases of schooling, namely the Foundation Phase, which includes the Reception year and Grades 1, 2 and 3; the Intermediate Phase, which includes Grades 4, 5 and 6; the Senior Phase, which is made up of Grades 7, 8 and 9, and the Further Education and Training Phase, which covers Grades 10, 11 and 12. Students may either enroll for the four-year BEd program, specializing in a particular phase, or combine two of the phases. For example, those who prefer teaching younger children would enroll for a BEd Foundation Phase (Grades R – 3), while those who prefer teaching older and much older children would enroll for a BEd Intermediate and Senior Phase (Grades 4 – 9) or a BEd Senior and Further Education and Training Phase (Grades 10 – 12) respectively. Teaching practice as a focus of this study is a component of the formal academic programs such as the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) and the Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) for preparing student teachers.

Reddy, Menkeld and Bitzer (2008) established that teaching practice for a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) and a Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) is organized in different ways in South African Institutions Higher Learning, ranging from weekly visits to schools for teaching practice and to block periods of school visits in others. At the ODL institution under study, it is organized in block periods (six weeks). This situation of variations in the number of days or weeks that student teachers spend in the schools including the manner of teaching practice supervision is similar to a variety of teaching practice models in Tasmania most of which include sequenced school placements supervised by cooperating teachers and university staff (Ntsaluba & Chireshe, 2013).

The research was undertaken following a concern raised by the review panel for the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC, 2008) which conducted a programs audit at the University of South Africa (UNISA), Open and Distance Learning Institution (ODL). A point of criticism in the report of the review panel relates to a compromised quality assurance in teaching practice component in both the BEd and PGCE programs. The report pointed out the following areas that needed to be improved: selection of schools, placement of student teachers, training of mentors and mentoring during the teaching

practice period, and assessment of student teachers' competence and feedback to the university (HEQC, 2008). It is on the basis of the HEQC report that this study was conducted solely to capture the views of the student teachers towards teaching practice at UNISA. Most studies focus on the importance of teaching practice and its supervision, and they exclude other concerns of student teachers, even though they are essential elements in their programs. Marais and Meier (2004) emphasize that the type of concerns student teachers encounter should be given more attention to enable proper organization and coordination of the teaching practice. The HEQC's criticisms referred to above, enabled formulation of the following main research question which guided this study was: What are the experiences in the teaching practice of distance learning students at UNISA?

### **Previous Research Studies on Teaching Practice in ODL Institutions**

Internationally, teaching practice in Distance Education (DE) is an issue that has been researched for some time. Several studies on teacher training through Distance Education (DE) reveal that the organization of practice teaching for student teachers presents both logistical and educational challenges (du Plessis, 2013, Aldridge, Fraser & Ntuli, 2009). Problems facing practical teaching via DE include: the placing of students at approved schools, mentoring and supervising them during school visits, building relationships with all stakeholders, assessment, and feedback (du Plessis, 2013). Mubika and Bukaliya (2013) state that some problems in the training of teachers through ODL arise specifically from the nature of distance education among which are the factors to do with its scale, distribution of students, technology integration, tutors and schools, range of stakeholders and partners responsible for different tasks.

These authors further note that the assessment of students' competences during teaching practice remains problematic and contentious (Mubika & Bukaliya, 2013). Additionally, debates about the assessment of the practice of student teachers often reflect on-going philosophical debates about the nature of teacher education and traditional barriers between teachers and academics (Mubika & Bukaliya, 2013). Despite this, practice teaching remains a pillar of teacher education as it provides opportunities for evaluating in-service teachers in authentic environments (Mubika & Bukaliya, 2013).

In-service teachers enrolled in distance programs are usually in their place of work when they attend the teacher training programs. However, finding the means to assess their teaching practice eludes most institutions. Educational difficulties arise from the old problem of integrating theory and practice. Educational difficulties also arise from the fact that the task of supervising coupled with other duties makes it almost impossible for the teacher educator to witness as an in-classroom observer the wide range of instructional strategies that form the basis of an inquiry learning environment (Mubika & Bukaliya, 2013).

Due to numerous challenges encountered by DE, some institutions had abandoned supervision of teaching practice because of organizational difficulties. However, various alternative strategies have been put in place in attempts to mitigate the supervision needs of the teacher training program. For example, in Nepal peer-teaching sessions would be arranged to introduce a practical element to teacher education (Holmes, Karmacharya & Mayo, 1993). In Brazil where one of the teacher training programs had no capacity to supervise teaching practice, microteaching was incorporated into face-to-face sessions with teachers (Oliveira & Orivel, 2003). The Open University in United Kingdom, does not supervise teaching practice but has tried to link theory and practice by inviting teachers to report on their classroom experiences of ideas and practical activities covered in the course (Perraton, 1993).

Partnerships with various stakeholders in the teacher education program serve to maintain a clear understanding of the value of their program with people who may well be their future employers. In many countries where there are several providers of teacher education there can be competition for the use of schools. Under such

pressure the school/institutional links are especially vulnerable to the effects of misunderstanding. The supervision that occurs during field experience also reflects theoretical and practical conditions. During supervision both the mentor (also known as the cooperating teacher) and the lecturer, need to cooperate and find solution to the problems that may be affecting the teaching practice for teacher students. In some cases, it is also often the case that it is difficult for a teacher education institution to find sufficient schools in which to place their students (Mubika & Bukaliya, 2013).

On the issue of mentoring, Halloway (2001) states that the mentor generally takes on the role of mentoring and supporting student teacher from a sense of commitment to their profession rather than of commitment to any institution or for the remuneration. Such arrangements usually require the school or the mentor teacher to work exclusively with the contracted institution and thus close that link for other institutions and their students. Mentors need special preparation for their role so that the experience they provide links with the program goals. Therefore training of mentors is also a critical aspect before the mentors can be assigned to particular student teachers (Halloway, 2001)

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The study focused on the experiences of student teachers towards teaching practice in an open and distance learning (ODL) institution in South Africa. The research was conducted at UNISA, and more specifically in the Department of Teaching Practice, one of the biggest departments in the College of Education in the university. UNISA was selected for the following reasons: firstly it has a large student population compared with other universities in South Africa, and secondly it was easier for the researcher and author of this article to conduct this study as he is a lecturer in the College of Education at UNISA. This study used a mixed-method design which is the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Morgan (2014) contends that mixed-method helps answer questions that cannot be answered by qualitative or quantitative methods alone. The mixed-method design was found to be appropriate for this study as it would potentially yield a better understanding of the challenges faced by student teachers in an ODL context. In line with Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007), qualitative data from individual in-depth interviews was used to complement quantitative data and for the purposes of triangulation.

### **Participants of the Study**

The research study targeted 150 undergraduate distance education students who were in their fourth year of study enrolled for the module in teaching methods (subject didactics) of life sciences for a BEd degree, specializing in secondary-school teaching. The Life Sciences module was selected because it is one of the priority learning areas for the South African Department of Basic Education. The sampling ratio of 40% (n=60) was decided on, following the sampling guidelines as provided by Grinnel and Williams (1990:127), who consider performing basic statistical procedures on a sample of 40% as being sufficient. The sample may be relatively small for a quantitative study; but the sampling frame contained the complete target population. In addition, purposeful sampling was used to select the qualitative sample. Purposeful sampling occurs when individuals are selected who possess the characteristics or attributes of interest to the study (Creswell, 2013). Five (5) students as illustrated in Table 1 also in their fourth year of study were selected for qualitative interviews. These five (5) students did not complete the questionnaires for quantitative data. The entire sample of 65 students had already completed three cycles of teaching practice.

**Table 1. Description of the qualitative research sample Student Teachers (N=5)**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>3</b>
	<b>Male</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Qualification &amp; Phase</b>	<b>BEd (Senior &amp; FET Phase)</b>	
<b>Pseudonyms of participants</b>	<b>Student A; B; C; D and E</b>	<b>5</b>

**Data Collection Tools**

A non-experimental descriptive survey research design involving quantitative data was used to collect data from members of the population in order to determine their views toward teaching practice in an ODL context. A combination of questionnaire and semi-structured interview guides for individual interviews were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data respectively. A questionnaire consisting of 8 items, adapted from Caires and Almeida's (2005) Inventory of Experiences and Perceptions at Teaching Practice (IEPTP) was used to collect data. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part was designed to elicit socio-demographic data from the students teachers and contained closed questions (multiple-choice or yes/no questions). The second part of the questionnaire, represented in Table 2 was designed to elicit information on the degree of agreement with the item statement presented on the questionnaire following the purpose of the study. The items in this part of the questionnaire were also closed questions.

Individual interview discussions with fourth year student teachers were conducted in order to obtain a better understanding of a problem or an assessment of a problem, concern, new product, program or idea (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2006). The semi-structured interview guide was used to generate information on the challenges faced by the student teachers in an ODL context. An expert in teacher education discipline checked on the relevance of the instruments' items for both quantitative and qualitative. Furthermore, to ensure quality of qualitative data, participant or member-checking was used to confirm with the participant that the data were what the research participant meant.

**Data Collection Procedure**

The researcher distributed the questionnaires with the aid of lecturers and supervisors who supervised students during teaching practice. Other questionnaires were self-administered by the researcher since he is involved in the supervision of student teachers during teaching practice in schools. The questionnaires were collected on the spot. All distributed questionnaires were returned. Five (5) students who participated in the interviews were purposefully selected from the group of students who did not complete the quantitative questionnaire. The rationale was to determine if the information provided in the questionnaire would be confirmed or reputed or elaborated upon when a different approach was used. Interviews were conducted after working hours and each interview lasted for thirty minutes. The researcher took notes during individual interviews and to enhance accuracy mechanically recorded the discussions with the use of an audiotape recorder.

**Data Analysis**

The researcher made use of descriptive statistics to analyze data collected by way of questionnaires. Qualitative data were analyzed with the content analysis method, one of the qualitative data analysis strategies (Cresswell, 2009). For content analysis, first, data were coded by dividing the text into small units and unitized until themes and relationships were identified. Verbal codes reflecting or illustrating the main findings from the interview discussions were presented.

### Ethical Considerations

The questionnaire contained a section explaining the purpose of the study, confidentiality and the voluntary nature of the study. The participants gave informed consent verbally. However, confidentiality was guaranteed by making sure that the data could not be linked to individual respondents by name since the participants were not requested to write their names on the questionnaires (Ntsaluba, 2012).

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### Findings from Quantitative Questionnaire

##### Biographical information

Participants provided biographical information regarding age, gender and ethnicity, and the phase and the sector they would prefer to teach the following year. The majority of the participants (70%) were aged below 30 years, thus being able to offer several future years to the teaching profession. The gender balance was expectedly uneven with 80% being female participants and 20% being male participants. This situation confirms the notion that most men do not wish to enter the teaching profession (Mokoena, 2012).

Table 2. Biographical information (N=60)

Student Teacher Gender	Frequency	%
Female	48	80
Male	12	20
Student Teacher Age	Frequency	%
30 and younger	42	70
31-39	12	20
40 and above	6	10

#### Responses from closed questionnaires items

Table 3. Responses of student teachers (N=60)

	Variables	Yes		No	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%
1	Were you placed on time at the school not far away from where you live?	10	33	50	83
2	Were you placed in a well-resourced school?	35	58	25	41
3	Were you supervised during your teaching practice in schools?	15	25	45	75
4	Were you supervised by the University lecturers?	20	33	40	66
5	Was the supervision arranged by the University?	60		0	
6	Was the supervision beneficial towards your training as a teacher?	36	60	24	40
7	Were you assigned a mentor during the practice teaching?	40	66	20	33
8	Was the mentoring beneficial towards your training as a teacher?	25	41	35	58

Results in Table 3 show that 83% of the student teachers indicated that they were not placed on time in approved schools in order to do their teaching practice. This is the biggest challenge Unisa is faced with, that is placing more than 20 000 students in a year using manual system (phoning-in the schools). Therefore, there is a need for the university to re-visit the current student placement system. Again, 75% indicated that they were not supervised while placed in schools for teaching practice. This problem could be linked to a shortage of supervisors. At this stage the University is relying heavily

on contracted supervisors and mentor teachers in schools to assist the student teachers during teaching practice. This is an unsafe approach which might compromise quality given the concerns raised by the review panel for the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) which conducted a programs audit at UNISA. For instance, student teachers who were supervised, 58% indicated that there was no meaningful mentoring. The student teachers might have experienced the feelings expressed by Maphosa, Shumba and Shumba (2007) that the mentors saw student teachers as relief teachers, who ended up taking full loads while mentors took a back seat. This disheartened the student teachers because such behavior is contrary to the concept of mentorship wherein the mentor operates normally in his or her classroom with the student teachers observing and learning and not given full charge of classes when they would still be learning the trade.

Maphosa, Shumba and Shumba (2007) also expressed another observation that, while some mentors overloaded student teachers during practice teaching, others might not have confidence in the student teachers and consequently they would not leave their classes in the student teachers' care. Others would not let student teachers to teach at any given time because they felt that student teachers would delay and waste learners valuable time and they would not be able to finish the syllabi on time. This might result in the student teachers getting discouraged and experiencing feelings of inadequacy and loss of confidence in their ability to teach. Such feelings of inadequacy could have negative influence on student teachers perception of the teaching profession.

#### **Findings from Qualitative Interview Discussions**

The study focused on the experiences of student teachers towards teaching practice in an open and distance learning (ODL) institution in South Africa. And the following research question guided this study: *What are the experiences in the teaching practice of distance learning students at UNISA?* The raw data that was collected from face-to-face interviews were studied, analyzed and generated themes are presented in Table 4 after which a detailed explanation of the themes is given.

**Table 4. Generated themes from qualitative data analysis**

<b>Research question</b>	<b>Generated themes</b>
What are the experiences in the teaching practice of distance learning students at UNISA?	<p>Theme 1: Placement</p> <p>Theme 2: Supervision and assessment procedures</p> <p>Theme 3: Effectiveness of teaching practice in improving student teachers' teaching skills</p>

#### **Theme 1: Placement**

The majority of the participants shared frustrations that they experience especially with regard to their placement in approved schools. Some students blamed the teaching practice office/unit at UNISA which do not respond to their queries timely. As student teacher A stated:

*Since there are many of us including students from other Universities we struggle to get space especially in good schools where we can be nurtured so that we become good teachers. Another problem relates to communication breakdown with the teaching practice unit at Unisa. Sometimes they don't answer phones and it frustrates us especially if you are stuck and you can't find a good school closer to where you stay to do practice teaching.*

These views complement the results obtained from the questionnaire. This finding confirms problems facing teaching practice in DE institution like Unisa which include a

challenge of placing of student teachers in approved schools to undertake teaching practice (du Plessis, 2013). It also became apparent during the interviews that some schools are willing to accommodate student teachers, however, at some schools there is poor management, non-existent timetables, lack of staff and non-mentoring all these impact negatively on the practice, leaving some students demotivated and disillusioned.

### **Theme 2: Supervision and assessment procedures**

As indicated earlier in this article, teaching practice is an integral part of Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) and Post-Graduate Certificate at Unisa, a DE institution. In support of this, module lecturers are expected to design workbooks, visit schools during teaching practice and are available to students to discuss problems. During the interviews it emerged that some students, especially those who have registered a four a year degree qualification were visited twice others once over the three cycles of teaching practice. For example, student teacher C had this to say:

*Last year when I was doing my second teaching practice no one from the university visited me. And how do they expect us to be effective teachers on completion of our degree if they do not support us.*

Sharing the same view, student teacher D remarked as follows:

*The following week will be my last week doing teaching practice at this school. However, I have not been visited by any of my lecturers or supervisors. I do not know whether it will be possible for the remaining week to be visited and have the needed assessments.*

Analysis of these quotations from the student teachers is an indication that the supervision of student teachers during teaching practice was ineffective despite HEQC audit report which urged lecturers at Unisa to improve students' experience of teaching practice (HEQC, 2008). Again, these views reiterate a compromised quality assurance issue raised in the HEQC report.

### **Theme 3: Effectiveness of teaching practice in improving student teachers' teaching skills**

Apart from the organization of the teaching practice, the researcher was also curious to know from the participants if teaching practice had improved their teaching skills. According to Caires and Almeida (2005:112) teaching practice represents "a unique opportunity for the development and consolidation of a significant variety of knowledge and skills" for the vast majority of student teachers. During the interviews, student teacher B had this to say:

*No! In my opinion, teaching practice is not effective at all in improving our teaching skills. How can it be effective when we are not supervised and assessed the way it is recommended? In some instance we do not receive the required number of visits and assessments and there are occasions when some of us are not assessed the whole teaching practice period.*

In the same vein, student teacher A remarked as follows:

*How can you expect effectiveness in teaching practice while the supervision and assessment is not up to the scratch? For example let me tell you something that you might not be aware of...when lectures or supervisors come assessments, most of them do not stay longer in the classroom throughout the lesson or until the lesson ends. Some stay only for only ten minutes whereas the lesson is forty minutes. How can you we be effective in that case, that's impossible.*

When these quotations are carefully analyzed, these injustices could be linked to the limited number of lectures or supervisors who are always in a rush to assess large number of students within a short space of time, especially at this time when students' enrolments rate has increased at Unisa.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In true spirit, UNISA can produce good teachers through teaching practice. However, the quality of the program tends to deteriorate with the increasing numbers of students needing placement in schools. As the student enrolment increases, some students are placed in schools with inadequate facilities. The former reduces the control of students placed in schools and the latter reduces the relevancy of the program. Far from gaining valuable experience, students may be exposed to depressing conditions in schools which are hostile to the principles and methods supported by the university teaching practice unit. Instead of reinforcing theory, the experience may make it appear irrelevant. In order to build positive attitude of students towards teaching practice at UNISA, we propose the following:

- Problems facing the teaching practice unit at UNISA include the placing of more than 20 000 students at approved schools every year for teaching practice, the turn-around time in placing such a big number in approved schools, the shortage of supervisors to support and evaluate student lessons, the lack of support strategies, and contracted supervisors who lack knowledge and skills to evaluate certain critical learning areas, such as mathematics, science and technology. Another major challenge relates to the slow pace at which the university is moving to integrate technology in addressing the problem.

Given the great number of students that have to be placed in schools every year, the university should introduce an online placement system where students can place themselves by a click of a computer or a cell phone button. However, prior arrangements should be sought with the affected schools to ensure that students are accommodated without any difficulty. In addition, the affected ODL institution should enter into an agreement with the Department of Education to ensure that all the schools are loaded on the system. In fact all relevant stakeholders should be consulted and participate towards the design of the software. Figure 1 serves as guideline on how the envisaged system should be designed to alleviate the challenge relating to student placement at UNISA.

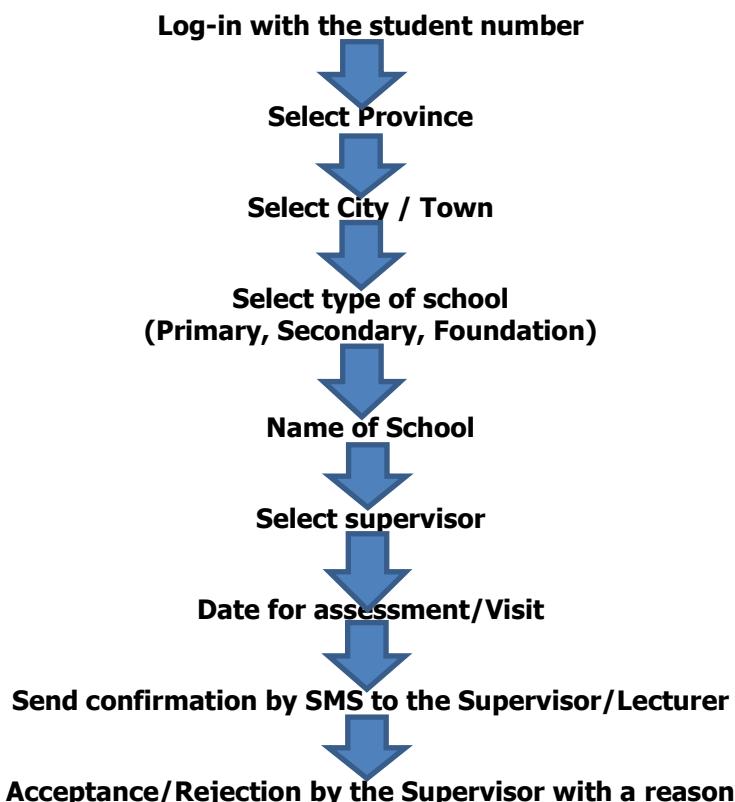


Figure 1: Proposed Online Student Placement System

- There should be a teaching practice handbook for the students so that they can follow a uniform method of preparing a lesson. Rules and regulations of practice teaching should also be stipulated in this handbook.
- In addition to the handbook, a “Teaching Practice Guidebook” is required. Such a guidebook will outline the procedures of teaching practice modules. It will also deal with the following: how a school is chosen /allocated; introduction to the school; allocation of subjects / learning areas in each level of school education in South Africa; and the involvement of mentor teachers. The visit by UNISA supervisors should also be explained in detail so that student teachers will know what to expect and to do during the visit.
- While some respondents indicated that the supervision and mentoring were beneficial towards their training, others felt exploited and unsupported by the mentors. The study therefore recommended that teacher training institutions should work hand in hand with the schools and organize workshops to empower and support mentors. This would mean identifying the mentor teacher with the assistance of the schools – especially school management – to ensure that the student teachers know from the start what is expected of them, their full responsibilities and to what extent they can be assisted in becoming well qualified and quality teachers in South Africa.
- Receiving schools should be encouraged to be positive about teaching practice. Teaching practice should not be seen as an evaluation or assessment of whether one is a good teacher or not, but should be about the qualities, passion, commitment and willingness to make a difference in people’s lives, especially the learners and the communities around the schools.
- Peer support should be encouraged during teaching practice. This means that teachers must be encouraged to work harmoniously with the students in giving advice, general assistance and mentoring. This will possibly inspire the student teachers as it eliminates the fear of the teaching practice environment by encouraging the culture of collegiality and togetherness. This will hopefully improve the attitudes of the student teachers, based on their experiences of teaching practice.

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